



NY Independent Cinema at Cannes: Jim Jarmusch's "Down by Law" and Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It"

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Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law* and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*

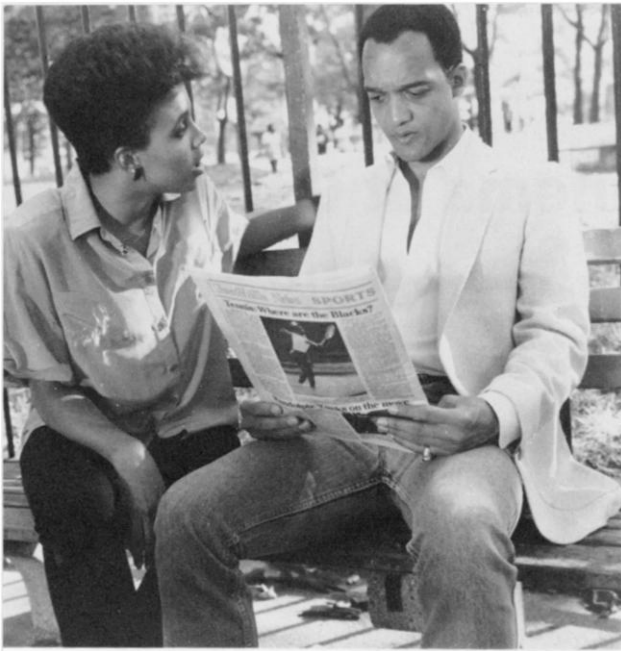
Jim Jarmusch's *Down by Law*, presented in the official selection at the Cannes Film Festival of 1986, and Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, presented in the "Quinzaine des réalisateurs" ("Directors' Fortnight") section, show a number of immediately striking similarities: highly luminous black-and-white photography, an unconventional approach to narrative structure, and a firm commitment to the representation of off-beat life-styles and personalities.

Within the first few minutes of each, we are shown the face of a beautiful sleeping black woman shot from an intriguingly peculiar angle. In *Down by Law*, the (fairly minor) character to whom the face belongs is Bobbie (Billie Neal), a sharp-mouthed prostitute working for Jack (John Lurie), small-time New Orleans pimp and gambler. Jack, who responds calmly to the contemptuous criticism Bobbie heaps on him with the remark, "Baby, you sure how how to talk," will shortly wind up in the Orleans Parish Prison where he makes the acquaintance of Zack (Tom Waits), a burned-out disc jockey, and Roberto (or "Bob" it's the same thing) (Roberto Benigni), a recent immigrant from Italy. The adventures of this threesome—intra-muros and extra-muros—occupy the major part of the film. Except during the opening and closing segments of the film, we are nearly always alone with Jack, Zack and Bob, first in their prison cell, and then in the Louisiana swamplands once they have broken out.

The point of departure for the construction of *Down by Law* would seem to have been the questions, Where does a story come from?

*Spike Lee tells me that the expression "down by law" refers to "someone you can really count on," using "down" in a sense reminiscent of "he's really down" = "he's a good person" (especially, one who's ready to participate in anything).

How does a film-maker isolate the elements of a narrative from the vast and heterogeneous assemblage of material to which the camera gives him access? The creation of a fictional universe calls first of all for the establishment of a place: thus the film opens with a brief and excellent series of rapid lateral travellings, low-angled as the buildings of old New Orleans—perched precariously against a sky heavy with imminent drama—glide by, and then at street-level while the neighborhood, seen as if through the frame of a car window, continues to stream past. Some music, some smooth motion, some black-and-white urban imagery, and within the film's first few moments, Jarmusch has us already installed in a world throbbing with the promise of a thousand stories. ("La ville, c'est la fiction," Godard tells us in his short film *Lettre à Freddy Buache à propos d'un court-métrage sur la ville de Lausanne* [1982], "... c'est la nécessité de la fiction.") A sampling of these follows: little, barely connected dramatic episodes, each of which might have been developed into a major strand of the story. Bobbie, for example, with her spirited sarcasm, her good looks and her status as Jack's bottom-woman, might have served as a convenient means for advancing the film's plot. But hers is one of the stories that Jarmusch decides not to tell us; after a single episode in the beginning, she disappears from the film. What Jarmusch does with such fragments in no way resembles the intricate interweaving of intersecting story lines which can be found in films such as Ioselliani's *Les favoris de la lune* (1983); rather, he extracts from their infinitely complex potential the simplest of situations. Jack, Zack and Bob, drawn out of their disparate, barely overlapping universes by a classically outlandish but convincing set of circumstances, travel



Tracy Camila Johns and Redmond Hicks in
SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT

a length of story line together, and then go their separate ways as the film comes to a close.

The sleeping face of *She's Gotta Have It*'s opening belongs to Nola Darling, played by Tracy Camila Johns, upon whom Lee bet heavily and won. Her face in all its changes—and the mind and body which go with it—constitute the pivot around which the film's entire action revolves and she and Lee succeed in creating a character who is so singularly rich and appealing that, despite her nearly constant presence on the screen, we never reach a point of saturation; she remains interesting throughout. Nola Darling's relationships with her three male lovers, one lesbian friend, and a former roommate could have served as the basis for a fast-paced, action-packed story of love and lust in Brooklyn. But they do not. Lee uses them rather as points of access to that segment of the (fictional) world that is Nola. Clearly, there is for him no "right" way of seeing her, no "correct" interpretation of her actions. As he has Nola herself tell us, all those people who *think* they know her do in fact know some part of her. Thus, the character of Nola is presented to us as the sum of a number of different points of view about her, among which the most important is her own.

Much closer in its structure to Eric Mitchell's unjustly ignored *The Way It Is* or

Eurydice of the Avenues (1983) than to the films of Jarmusch, *She's Gotta Have It* mixes dramatic episodes with elements normally associated with non-fiction film. Characters often look directly into the camera, for example, and speak as if responding to the questions of an interviewer.

Quite obviously, traditional modes of narrative development are rejected by both Jarmusch and Lee. Yet their films remain unequivocally within the realm of narrative fiction film. Their goal is not to destroy the story, but to construct it differently ("C'est une loi du cinéma," the scriptgirl tells the director in Godard's *Passion* [1981], "il y a une histoire et il faut la suivre.") Thus, while the standard linear elaboration of a single well-made plot line is discarded, heavy emphasis on the construction of a small number of engrossing, psychologically believable characters is retained. The characters of both films are touching and free-spirited, winning and funny. However, there is a curious difference between them. Jarmusch's characters (of whom the three principal ones are white and several of the secondary ones black) are outsiders in the deepest sense of the word. They bring to mind not the mildly marginal misfits of *Stranger than Paradise*, but characters like Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1959). Like him, they have no future and live in an acute state of lawlessness; like him, they are involved in activities such as gambling, prostitution and homicide and are careening "vers la précipice à 100 à l'heure." When compared to them, the characters of *She's Gotta Have It* (all of whom are black) appear to be remarkably integrated. We never see them handling guns or languishing in prison. They are not on the run from the police and most of them even seem to have jobs: Nola is a commercial artist, her father and ex-roommate are musicians. Among her suitors, Greer Childs (John Terrell) is a successful male model; the profession of Jamie Overstreet (Redmond Hicks) is never specified, but he does not seem to be unemployed. Only Mars Blackman (played by Spike Lee himself), who wears fifty-dollar sneakers although he hasn't had a job in two years, seems to have problems in this department. The values and world views of mainstream America are as foreign to them as they are to



Roberto Benigni, Nicoletta Braschi, Tom Waits, and John Lurie in DOWN BY LAW

Jarmusch's romantically doomed rebels. But unlike the latter, Lee's characters seem to have succeeded in carving out a small breathing space for themselves in white America. They have not "sold out" or been taken in by false dreams of justice and equality. But perhaps they are just as happy to leave high-

styled self-destructive rebellion to characters like Jack and Zack. Perhaps they have known too many martyrs to take the business of rebellion as a game. "Yeah," says Blackman/Lee when Nola reminds him that May 19th is Malcolm X's birthday, "he was down by law."

MAURICE YACOWAR

The Canadian as Ethnic Minority

To function as an ethnic minority in North American cinema, you don't have to be Jewish—or black, grey, or a vampire. It's enough to be a Canadian—but only in Canada. The Canadian film experience proves that a whole nation can feel itself a silenced, even invisible, Outsider in its own home. Canadian film shows all the characteristics of the American ethnic minority film. The central characters

are identifiably outside the cultural mainstream. They look, sound, and act different from the traditional norms. Furthermore, the audience is expected to relish these differences. Also, whatever the particular plot, there is an implicit tension between the central characters and the society from which they are thus set apart. These characters' heroism and popularity carry an additional value of success in the